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ABSTRACT

In this autobiography, Lori Arviso Alvord describes her journey to become the first Navajo woman surgeon and her realization of the benefits of Navajo philosophy to the healing process. Raised on the Navajo reservation by a White mother and a Navajo father and grandmother, Alvord learned to walk in two worlds. Encouraged to get an education, she was accepted at Dartmouth, which has an historic mission to educate Native Americans and a strong Native community. A summer job as a medical research assistant led her eventually to Stanford Medical School, where Navajo cultural values and beliefs such as humble behavior and taboos about death presented obstacles to success. Aided by Stanford's commitment to increasing the number of women in its surgery program and by the mentorship of a Native surgeon, Alvord completed surgical training and returned home to work for the Indian Health Service. She quickly recognized the lack of understanding between Native patients and the mostly non-Native doctors. In addition, a number of incidents revealed how health and healing were affected by patient beliefs and by the emotions and attitudes of both patient and physician. The key lies in the Navajo philosophy of "walking in beauty," living a balanced and harmonious life connected to all the components of one's world. Alvord discusses her efforts to find that balance, both in her personal life and as a surgeon, and what such a philosophy could bring to Western medicine. (Contains a short bibliography and a Navajo glossary.) (SV)

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